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# The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Bennett County

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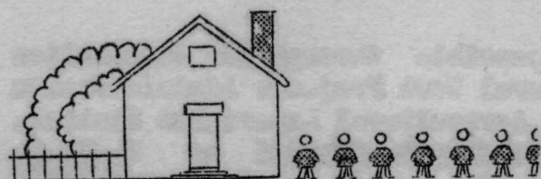
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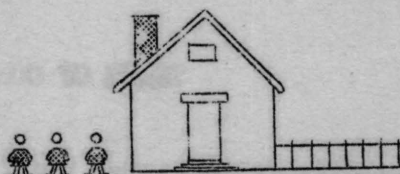
May, 1942

THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
The Elementary Schools  
of  
Bennett County

W. F. Kumlien  
Howard M. Sauer  
C. Scandrette



In 1926, 629 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Bennett county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 290

Each figure represents 100 pupils

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## EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high cost per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Bennett county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution; as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

\* \* \* \* \*

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\* \* \* \* \*

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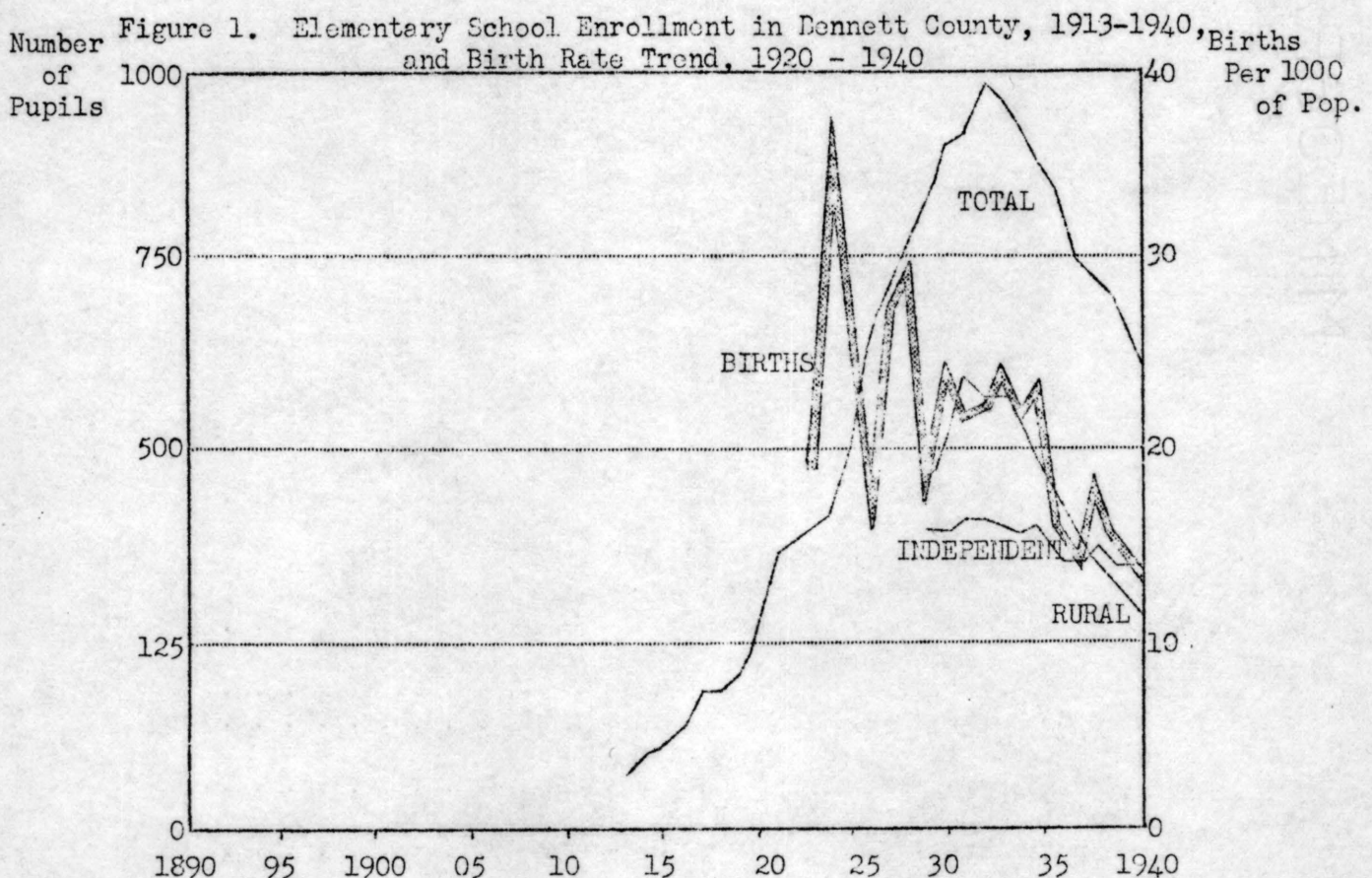


## The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Bennett County

For a number of years population experts have predicted that the downward trend of the birth rate would eventually cause a serious decline in the elementary school enrollment. This prophecy has been in the process of fulfillment in Bennett county since 1932.

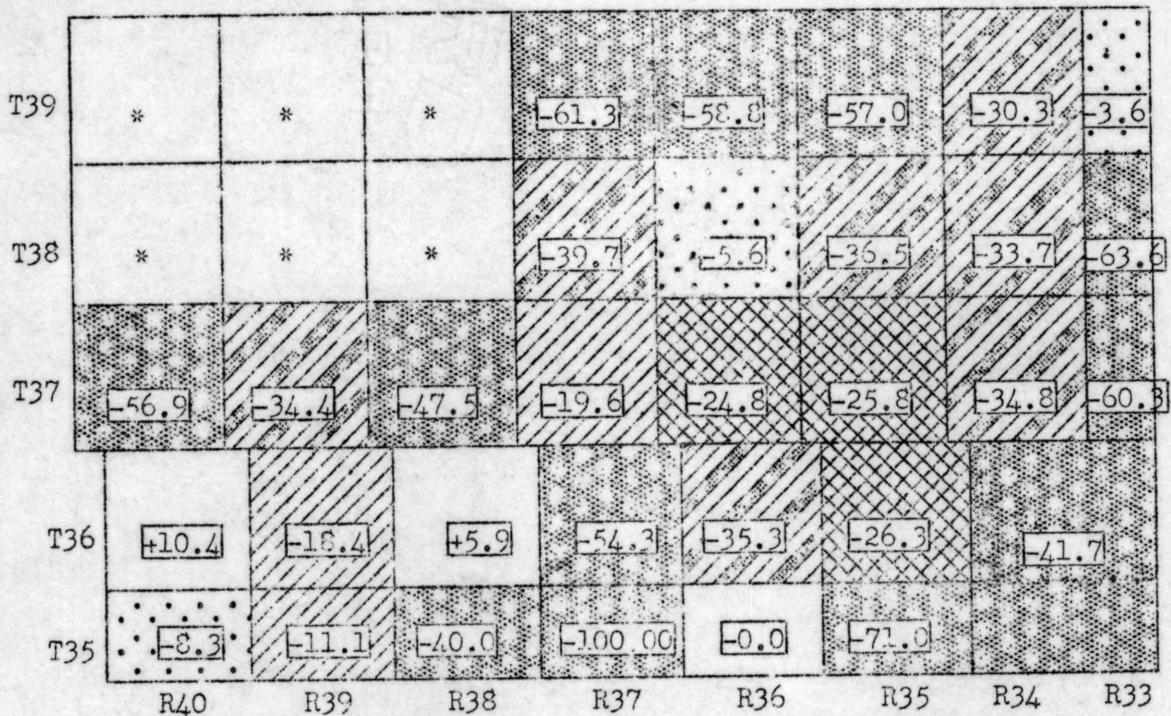
Bennett county, which formed from parts of Lugenbeel, Shannon, Washabaugh and Washington counties, was organized in 1912. Consequently the first enrollment recorded, 73 pupils, is for the year 1913. Between 1913 and the peak year of 1932 elementary enrollment skyrocketed to 982 pupils. Undoubtedly this abrupt rise was due to the influx of settlers which occurred after this area was first opened for white settlement. Since 1932 elementary enrollment has dropped rapidly, shrinking to 640 pupils by 1940, a low of 34.8 percent. It will be noted that the enrollment decline in the common school districts has been much more abrupt than in the independent districts.

The trend in the Bennett county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the drop in the birth rate roughly corresponds to the declining elementary enrollment trend. Although birth rates in Bennett county have shown considerable year by year fluctuation, the trend has been definitely downward. There was an average of 26.3 births per 1000 of the population during the five year period, 1923-27 as compared with only 16.1 births per 1000 persons during the five year period, 1936-1940. The result of this downward trend in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health

Figure 2. Population Gains and Losses in Bennett County, 1930-1940

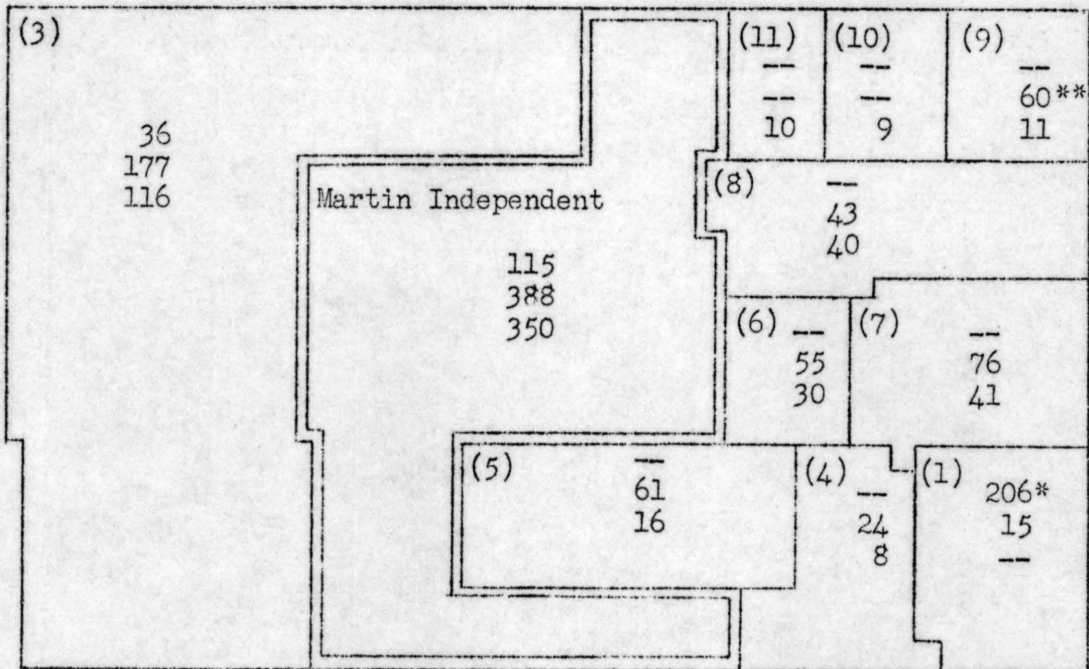


Legend: Gained or no change Lost 20.0 - 29.9%  
 Lost 1.0 - 9.9% Lost 30.0 - 39.9%  
 Lost 10.0 - 19.9% Lost 40.0% or more  
 \* Data unavailable separately. Combined gain, +21.6%  
 Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

An important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2, the loss of population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population of Bennett county shrank from 4,590 to 3,983, a loss of 13.2 percent. Although this is not as great a loss as was experienced in some counties, it is a factor closely related to rural enrollment decline. Since the population of Martin, the only incorporated town in the county, increased from 720 to 1013 persons between 1930 and 1940, it is evident that the bulk of the losses were suffered by the open country areas, a fact which is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollments. Of the 31 townships for which data were available, all except three experienced a population loss between 1930 and 1940. In 12 townships this loss amounted to more than 40 percent of the 1930 population; the loss in seven other townships ranged from 30.0 to 39.9 percent; three townships lost 20.0 to 29.9 percent of their 1920 population; the population of three townships suffered losses of 10.0 to 19.9 percent; and the population of three additional townships were reduced 0.1 to 9.9 percent. Data for individual townships were not available for an area embracing six townships in the north west corner of the county. For this area the population increased from 804 to 998 persons between 1930 and 1940. That a direct relationship exists between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the townships which had the greatest loss in population (see Figures 2 and 3) had the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollments.



Figure 3. Elementary Enrollments in the Bennett County School Districts 1920,1930 and 1940.



\* District # 1 in 1920, included Districts 4,5,6,7,8,9,10, and 11.

\*\* District # 9 in 1930, included Districts 10 and 11.

Legend: Top Figure 1920 Enrollment.  
Middle Figure 1930 Enrollment.  
Lower Figure 1940 Enrollment.  
( ) Indicates district number.

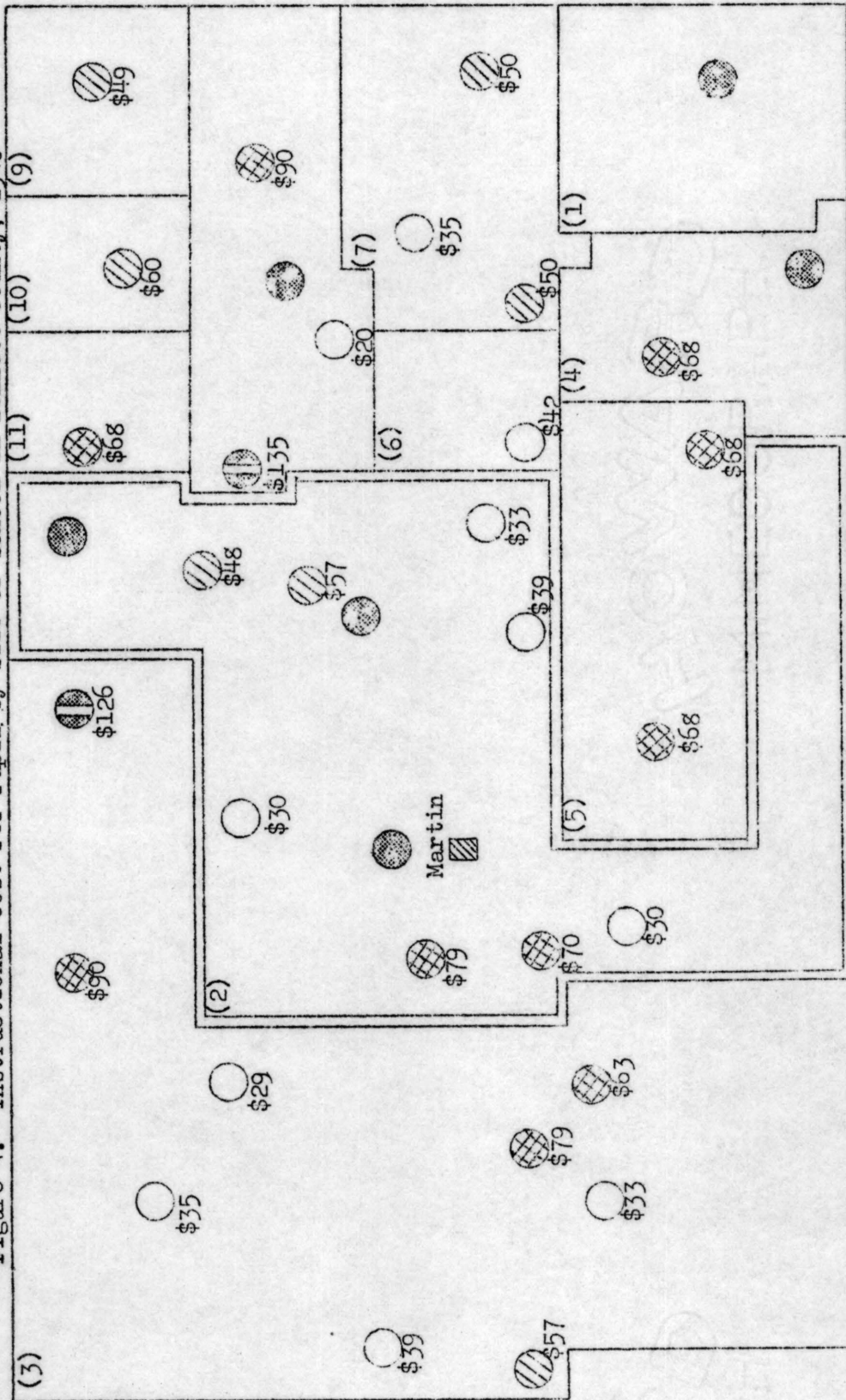
Source: Records of Bennett County Superintendent of Schools.

Thirty-four elementary schools were operating in Bennett county during the 1939-40 term. Of these schools 23 were operating in 10 common districts and eleven were operating in the Martin Independent District. Ten of these schools are located in the country and one is located in Martin, the county seat. For high school purposes the entire county is a district, the county high school being located at Martin.


The general downward trend in elementary enrollment is shown in Figure 3; which lists the enrollment of each district in the county for 1920,1930 and 1940. In 1920 there were only three districts in the county, district 1 at that time including the present districts 4,5,6,7,8,9,10 and 11. Districts 9, 10 and 11 were not formed until after 1930. It will be noted that between 1930 and 1940 every district suffered drastic reductions in elementary enrollment. In 1940, five schools had closed; two were operating with five or fewer pupils; twelve schools enrolled 6-10 pupils; seven were operating with 11-15 pupils, and eleven had enrollments exceeding 15 children.

A comparison of the average size of schools in the common districts of Bennett county during 1930 and 1940 indicates the serious nature of recent enrollment declines. In 1930, with 26 schools in operation, the average enrollment per school was 19.7 pupils as compared with only 12.6 pupils in 1940, with 23 schools in operation. Barring unforeseen population changes, further enrollment losses may be expected in coming years, although the rate of decline may not be so rapid.

Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School in Bennett County, 1940



Legend:

 Closed school

5 or fewer pupils

6 - 10 pupils

○ 11 - 15 pupils

16 or more pupils

Figure in ( ) indicates district number  
Figure below circle represents cost per pupil

Source: Records of Bennett County Superintendent of Schools



As may be seen in Figure 4, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Bennett county. In general it is those schools with the smallest enrollments which show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Bennett county ranged from \$135 for the Hill school, District 8, a school of four pupils, to \$19 for the Patricia school of District 8 with 30 pupils.

Table 1(below) indicates that the operation of schools for 10 pupils or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. This is particularly true for those schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average per pupil cost for the two schools in this group was \$130, as compared with \$32.58, the average for the 11 schools which enrolled more than 16 pupils.

Table 1. Instructional Cost\* Per Pupil for Operating Rural Schools Of Various Sizes in Bennett County, 1940

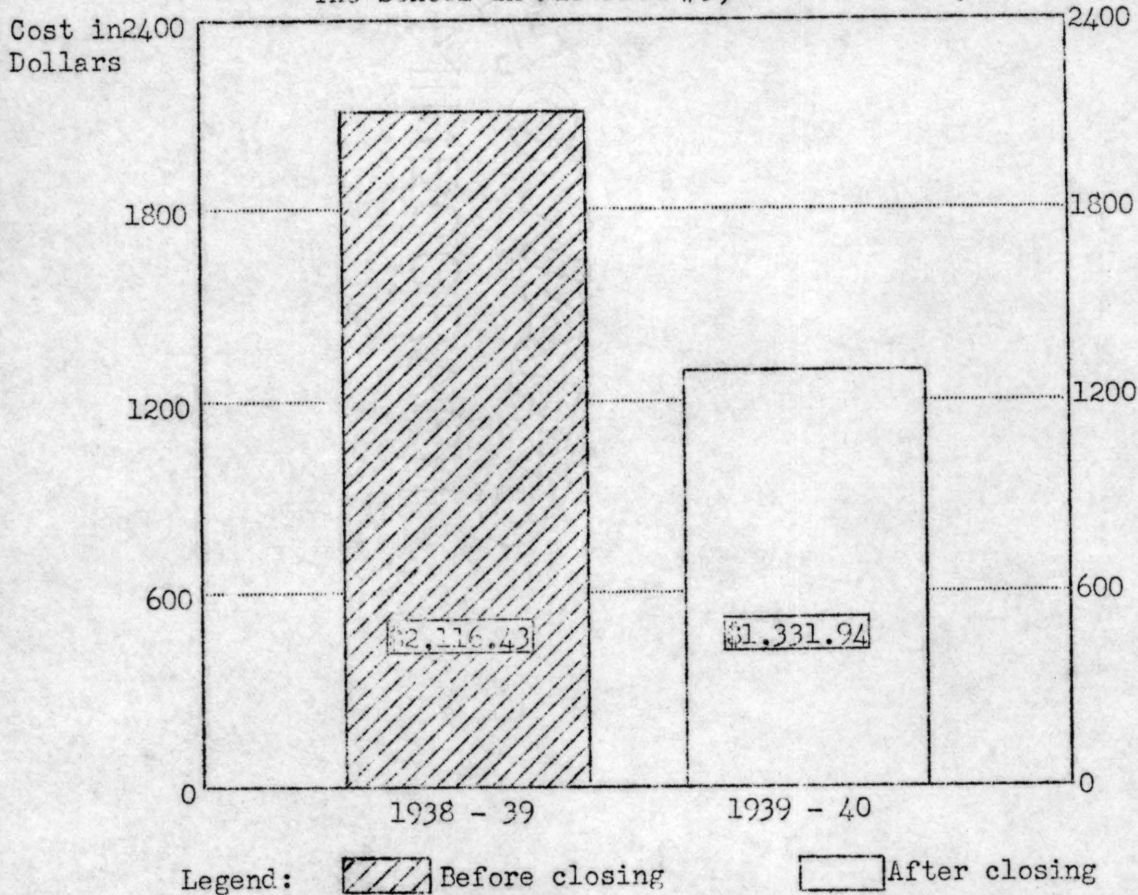
Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	37	417	\$19890.00	\$47.69
Closed schools	5	--	--	--
5 or fewer	2	9	1170.00	130.00
6 - 10 pupils	12	99	7155.00	72.27
11 - 15 pupils	7	82	4170.00	50.85
16 or more pupils	11	227	7395.00	32.58

\* Based on Teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Bennett County Superintendent of Schools.



Figure 5. Cost of Maintaining Educational Facilities Before and After Closing The School in District #5, Bennett County



Source: Records of Bennett County Superintendent of Schools

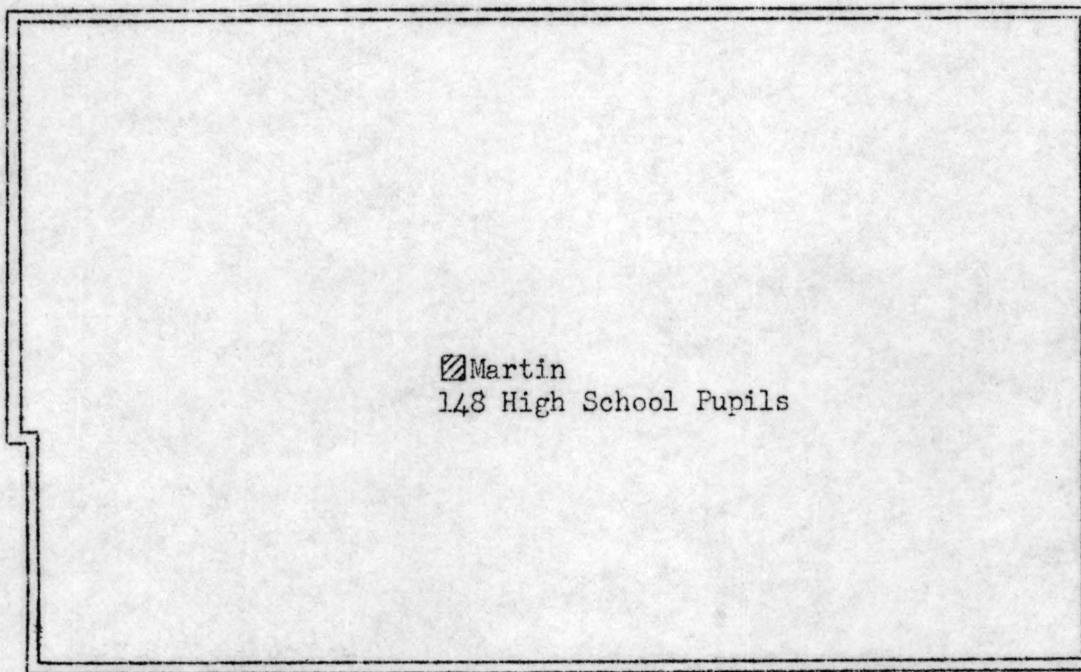
As a means of reducing high per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools during recent years, particularly those schools in which the enrollment had fallen below five pupils.

During the 1938-39 term it cost a total of \$2116.43 to operate three schools in District 5. The following year one of the schools was closed and as a result operating costs were reduced to \$1331.94, a saving of \$785.49 over the previous year.

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and because there is a lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition\*, it seems advisable both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops below five pupils.

\* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to get students interested.

Figure 6. High School Attendance Area in Bennett County, 1940



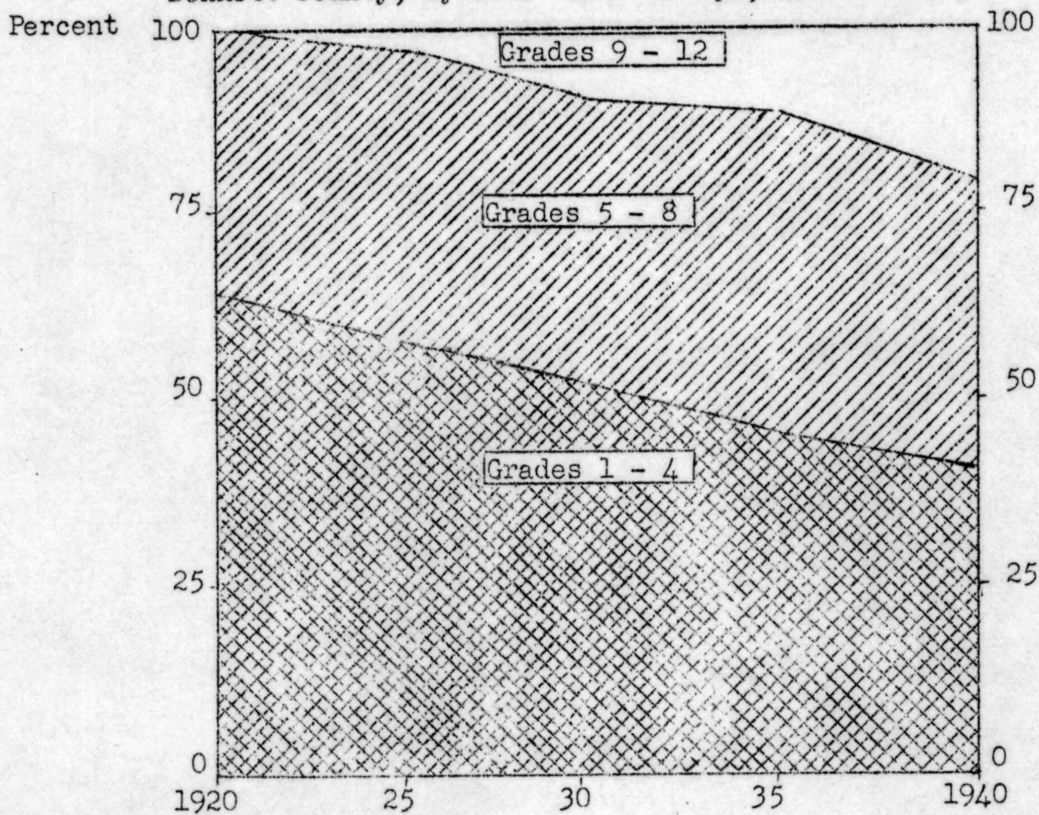
Source: Records of Bennett County High School

Bennett county has organized its high school system on a county-wide district plan. Pupils from all parts of the county attend High School at Martin, the county seat town. There is no tuition charge from the district in which the pupil attended elementary school but the expenses for maintaining the school are borne by the county. At present all pupils come from within the boundaries of Bennett county and no tuition is paid by the county or any of the common districts to any high school in an adjoining county.

A county-wide high school district system is well adapted to sparsely settled areas such as Bennett county where there are not enough potential high school students to maintain more than one good sized school. Pupils attending high school at Martin have the benefit of better trained instructors, better facilities, a wider range of courses and a better extra-curricular program than would be true if there were three or four high schools within the county.



Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments in Bennett County, by Four Grade Groups, 1920 - 1940.



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades of Bennett county shrank from 64.3 to 42.4 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment (Figure 7). This trend may be largely explained by the fact that birth rates have fallen sharply since 1920. Consequently, with each passing year there have been fewer and fewer pupils to enter the first grade.

In 1920 over twice as large a proportion (27.7 percent) of all elementary and secondary pupils were enrolled in the first grade than was true in 1940 when the first grade composed only 12.4 percent of the total. With the reduced number of persons under six years of age, it is obvious that elementary enrollments will continue to decline for several years even if the birth rate trend should be reversed.

Figure 7 also shows that the proportion enrolled in high school increased from 4.0 percent of the total in 1920 to 19.3 percent by 1940. This trend may be explained by the fact that an increasingly greater proportion of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table II. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments By Grades, 1920 - 1940.

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	27.7	12.9	8.8	14.9	10.0	11.7	5.6	8.0	.4	---	---	---
1925	21.3	12.0	12.2	12.0	11.0	9.3	9.5	9.7	1.2	1.2	.6	---
1930	16.2	14.5	9.1	12.1	11.1	11.0	8.7	7.2	3.0	4.0	1.9	1.2
1935	13.0	12.4	10.3	10.5	10.4	12.0	9.6	10.3	4.5	3.1	2.5	1.4
1940	12.4	9.6	9.4	11.0	8.7	9.8	10.6	9.2	5.9	4.4	4.6	4.4

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935, 1940.



How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully  
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

The county-wide system exists in the four unorganized counties of South Dakota, Shannon, Todd, Washington and Washabaugh. Under this plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.